

# Paul's Household Codes: Repressive or Redemptive?

*“Wives: be submitted to your husbands as is appropriate in the Lord.*

*Husbands: love your wives, and don't treat them harshly or respond with bitterness toward them.*

*Children: obey your parents in every way. The Lord is well pleased by it.*

*Fathers: don't infuriate your children, so their hearts won't harbor resentment and become discouraged.*

*Slaves: obey your earthly masters in all things. Don't just act earnest in your service only when they are watching. Serve with a sincere heart, fearing the Lord who is always watching! So no matter what your task is, work hard.*

*Always do your best as the Lord's servant, not as man's, because you know your reward is the Lord's inheritance. You serve Christ the Lord, and anyone who does wrong will be paid his due because He doesn't play favorites. Masters: treat your slaves fairly and do what is right, knowing that you, too, have a Master in heaven.” (Colossians 3: 18- 4:1, The Voice)*

This passage (as well as similar ones in Ephesians and 1 Peter) is often cited as a confirmation that the Bible is pro-slavery and anti-woman. At first glance, that certainly appears to be the case. I believe a deeper look at what's going on in this letter ( [and in the letter to Philemon](#), which was written about the same time and addressed to a member of the Colossian church) will help us understand what is truly happening here.

## **First, we need to know something about life in first century Colossae.**

As far back as the fourth century BC, there is a record that the Greeks viewed the household to be a miniature version of the order found in society, the realm of the gods, and ultimately the universe. [Aristotle even identified the three key relationships within the household that mattered](#): “The smallest and primary parts of the household are master and slave, husband and wife, father and children.”

Aristotle believed free men were by nature intended to rule over their wives, children, and slaves because they were created by the gods to be better. His writing is pretty clear on this point, noting that “the one gender is far superior to the other in just about every sphere,” and that “the slave has not deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature.” Considering this type of philosophical background, it’s worth understanding how life looked like for women, children, and slaves in the Greco-Roman world before we look at [Paul’s Christianized household code](#).

## **WOMEN**

Marriages were typically based on economic considerations. Wives were often young teens who married much older men. They were the property of their husbands. Marriage was not meant to join two lovers; it was a union for the raising of legitimate children to keep the family line going (Demosthenes noted: “Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of the body, but wives to bear us legitimate children”). Women existed to please the men around them, and a husband could do with his wife (or wives) whatever he wanted. Women had almost no voice in the home or in the city. They could not testify in court because they were considered unreliable (that was true in Judaism as well). Some were educated; most were not. They rarely joined their husband and his friends for meals, which was where all the important conversations happened.

## **CHILDREN**

The father also had authority over his children no matter their age. They were to submit to his will even after they had families of their own. Once again, his children existed to serve and please him. He could set them outside the city to die when they were babies if he didn’t like what he saw. He had absolute control over their lives. They were meant to bring him honor and perhaps wealth. It was all about him, not them.

## **SLAVES**

[Aristotle said slaves were “living tools,”](#) akin to animals. They were by nature created to serve. The Romans had a saying translated as “*a slave has no persona*,” or no personality. They were seen empty shells, blank slates with no identity or status apart from what their master granted them. In fact, in legal

cases, the “character” of the slave was considered representative of the master’s character. When we read the dramas and poetry that have survived from Paul’s time, we see that the Athenians viewed household slaves as skilled and productive (the were often highly educated, and many were doctors, professors, teachers, administrators, public servants and even policemen), but assumed they were con artists who acted nice while planning devious things.

## **Second, Christians were already at odds with both the culture and the law as they came to grips with what it meant to follow Christ.**

They were now part of what Paul called a [“new humanity”](#) in which the divisions of race, gender and freedom were meant to dissolve in mutual love toward Christ and each other. Of course, that was a work in progress. There were at least four ways in which the early followers of Christ began pushing back against the commonly accepted social norms as they sought to embody this reality.

- First, Jew, Gentile, slave, free, men and women were sharing common meals together in their meetings (1 Corinthians 11). This was simply not done in Greco/Roman culture. Meals separated the free men from everybody else.
- Second, [they organized their meeting times so that religious and social distinctions were minimized.](#)
- Third, Christian women learned philosophy, which the Greeks thought was nonsense ([see Chapter 33 in Tatian’s Address to the Greeks, “Vindication of Christian Women”](#)).
- Fourth, while the Romans passed laws forcing widows to get remarried (to keep society in lines with the order found in the realm of the gods), the early church helped the widows (1 Timothy 5:3-16) without always insisting they get remarried.

This was not necessarily sitting well with Rome. The early Christians were called “haters of humanity” because they so willingly broke down the structures that the Greeks and Romans believed brought stability to the nation and honor to the gods. When the husband/father of a household became a follower of Christ, his conversion brought him and his household shame and suspicion in the eyes of the Romans and Greeks. They were pretty sure this man and his family were on the

verge of becoming traitors to their country, the gods and the order of the universe.

Paul was trying to show a fledgling church how Christ would transform a culture beginning with the households in the church. It wasn't going to help if those households were eliminated before the message took hold. His approach needed to be full of both truth and tact.

## **Third, we need to know the Biblical explanation of what has gone wrong with the world - and how to fix it.**

The Bible presents the power struggle between people as having entered the world as a result of sin. We read of women in in Genesis 3:16 that, as a result of sin, "You will want to control your husband, but he will dominate you" (NET Bible). I saw a website for wives that posted this verse with the comments: "Could your desire for your husband be a little stronger? Could you let him rule over you a little more than you did last week?"

They are missing the point badly. This verse is not a promise of blessing; it's an observation about how life will now look in a fallen world. Rebellion broke the world. Genesis 3 is not a list of how things ought to be; it's an explanation of how things have become. One thing we learn right away: ***The fallen nature craves domination and hates servanthood.***

Christianity claims that Jesus Christ came to redeem not just people but the ways in which people have grown comfortable in their fallen state. As we ponder questions about leadership and submission, we see that Jesus did not seek the position His power offered him. Instead, he became a servant and gave his very life for those he loved as an example for how we are to live. Three examples from Scripture:

- Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:5-8).
- In speaking about authority Jesus said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your

slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25–28).

- When his disciples argued amongst themselves about who would be greatest in the kingdom, Jesus told them that “anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all” (Mark 9:35).

In Colossians, Paul is showing how redemption looks in relationships. For those who had been raised in submissive roles, he offers a new motivation as they move toward honor and equality. For those who have perpetrated an unjust use of power, he demands an entire makeover.

**Men - the culturally privileged and powerful - have to care for the people within their household *for their own sakes* with the same level of committed, self-sacrifice that Christ himself showed for us all.** Men who mistreat anyone in their household will eventually answer to God. In fact, the New Testament writers use figurative language to show men that they are spiritually in the same position as everyone in their household is literally: men are part of the bride of Christ; men are children of God; men are slaves to God. As God treats men in these roles spiritually, so men should treat those around them who have those roles physically. In a radical departure from what most of the people reading this letter would have been raised to believe, men must learn to genuinely love and serve those whom their culture said they could use and control. The redeemed nature chooses service over power.

This was unprecedented in the history of household codes. No one is told that they are better. No is told they have a right to rule. No one is told what their rights are or what is owed to them. They are all told what their responsibilities are to those around them: mutual service to honor Christ. The language used to describe each relationship is different, but the principle remains the same.

[A careful reading of the book of Philemon](#) will show that Paul wanted Philemon (who also received the letter to the Colossian church) to view Onesimus as a human being, a brother in Christ, a man of intrinsic value and worth. If Paul could accomplish that, all forms of injustice and inequality would fade away. The best way to change a cultural mindset that accepts inequality, dehumanization, and injustice is to change the hearts of those who perpetuate it in all its forms.

The wary eye of Rome would see the Christian household codes and look

elsewhere for subterfuge; meanwhile, the voice of truth within the church began to spread a message honor, worth, and dignity to those who has spent their lives on the margins of society.

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## **RECOMMENDED READING**

[N.T. Wright, Colossians and Philemon \(Tyndale New Testament Commentaries\)](#)

[Aristotle and the Household Codes](#)

[Aristotle vs. Jesus: What Makes the New Testament Household Codes So Different](#)